

Public Health in Southwest Washington

Southwest Washington Health District watches over the health of the people in Clark and Skamania Counties. This includes: watching for indicators of disease outbreaks and taking steps to stop these outbreaks; paying attention to reports of hazardous materials that can affect the health and safety of residents; and watching for changes in the population that might indicate needs for new services, changes in health care resources in the community and new threats to health and safety.

During 1999, Southwest Washington Health District took prompt action as cases of *E. coli* O157:H7 emerged in Clark County. Cooperative work on the part of Health District staff, the State Parks Service and the State Epidemiologist identified Battle Ground Lake as the source of the infection and stopped the spread of this serious communicable disease. We are grateful there were no deaths, and the children who were hospitalized are now home.

1999 saw an emerging condition of another kind. Initiative 695, a tax-elimination measure passed by the voters, impacted public health and all local government across the state of Washington. Southwest Washington Health District lost an important revenue source, and budget cuts were necessary. Working with the Board of Health, District staff used an extensive prioritization process to decide where the budget would be reduced. Thirty positions were eliminated, the most drastic cuts of any agency in Southwest Washington.

Southwest Washington Health District is one of 34 public health agencies in the State of Washington, working to protect and promote the health of our residents. In the face of emerging public health concerns and diminished resources, Southwest Washington Health District will continue to focus on protecting the public from disease and promoting the health of the people in our communities.

Kay Koontz
Executive Director

1999 Southwest Washington Board of Health

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Health District environmental health specialist Marty McGinn samples water at Battle Ground Lake. © Tim LaBarge/The Columbian
Right: E. coli under the microscope from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

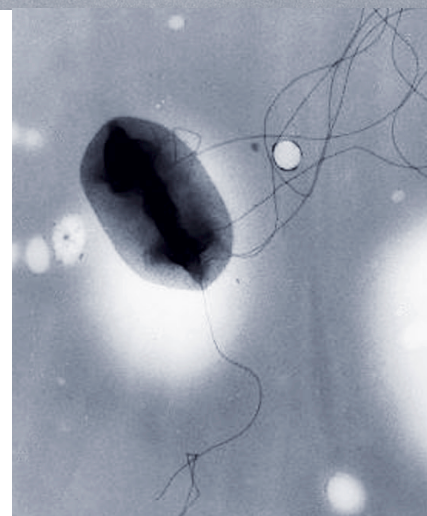
Protecting the Public from Infectious Disease

The Health District is responsible for monitoring infectious diseases including hepatitis, tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases. In 1999 more than 9,000 calls were received related to communicable diseases, and after investigation, 337 were reported to the State Department of Health, as required by law. These cases required follow-up to determine the source of infection, and 757 individuals at risk of secondary infection were contacted to ensure that they would receive appropriate treatment. Fifteen cases of tuberculosis and 15 cases of AIDS were identified in 1999.

On August 28, 1999 four children in Clark County became ill with severe symptoms that turned out to be an *E. coli* O157:H7 infection. Within hours, an investigation showed a link to Battle Ground Lake, and by midnight the swimming beach at the lake was closed by Southwest Washington Health District. This action prevented the outbreak from becoming much more serious, although a total of 37 people (65% were children under 10 years old)

became infected, including 8 who were hospitalized. All of these had been swimmers in Battle Ground Lake before it was closed or had contact with people who had been swimming there. There were no deaths. Local and state epidemiologists, infection control practitioners, health care providers, and laboratorians contributed their knowledge and resources to controlling the outbreak.

The *E. coli* outbreak is just one example of how the role of protecting public health is carried out systematically, from receiving the first reports of illness, to beginning an investigation, identifying the probable source of the contamination and taking action to stop the spread of disease and to prevent recurrence.



Just as important as finding and stopping outbreaks of infectious disease is the work of the Health District to ensure that food eaten in restaurants is prepared in sanitary conditions and is safe to eat. Inspections were conducted at 2,469 businesses that serve food, and 1,393 food serving permits were issued to people who learned safe food handling techniques in Health District classes.

The State and the Health District require that septic systems, which treat sewage waste for thousands of homes in Clark and Skamania Counties, be inspected and

maintained to ensure effective operation. If not properly maintained, these systems often fail, causing public health hazards and polluting surface and ground water. Since the Health District's implementation in 1997 of the operation and maintenance program, 15,146 owners of septic systems have been notified of maintenance needs. Of these, nearly 95% have responded and carried out the maintenance. The District issued 482 permits for new septic systems and 887 renewals during the year.

Improving the Community's Health

Promoting healthy behaviors and access to health care are important in protecting public health. The Health District worked closely with other community agencies in 1999 to increase the percentage of residents, especially children, covered by health insurance. In Clark County, children's enrollment in federal and state health insurance (Medicaid and Basic Health Plus) increased nearly 14%. Those covered by health insurance are more likely to get needed health care, preventative care and regular immunizations and are less likely to spread vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles and chicken pox.

To provide cost-effective vaccinations throughout Clark and Skamania Counties, the Health District distributed 135,306 doses of vaccine to medical offices during 1999. Health District staff also provided consultation, education and quality assurance regarding storage, handling and use of the vaccines through 1,728 phone calls and visits to medical offices.

Health District staff worked to reduce the risk of HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) transmission in part by promoting safe sex practices. District staff served 182 individuals with HIV or AIDS, including 48 new clients, ensuring their access to needed health and human services. Syringe exchange is a proven method of preventing the spread of communicable disease, and 5,035 people

exchanged 241,858 used syringes for new ones. In order to ensure high standards of screening, diagnosis and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, Health District staff gave presentations to nearly 200 health care providers.

Unintended pregnancies often lead to child neglect, poverty, ill health and abortion. In order to promote healthy reproductive behaviors, health educators at Southwest Washington Health District provided 231 trainings and presentations to 2,339 individuals throughout Clark and Skamania Counties.

In addition to testing more than 2,000 people for tuberculosis (TB), continuing education training on TB was presented to 56 health care providers, and 14 organizations in the District were recognized for helping to assure access to tuberculosis care and prevention.

The SWIFT Community Dental Clinic provided 3,695 dental services in 1999; this meant reduced pain and improved health for 558 low-income people who would otherwise have little hope of getting dental care.



Working for Healthier Families

A low-income woman who participates in the Women, Infants and Children Nutrition Program (WIC) receives nutrition education, vouchers for nutritious foods and access to prenatal care, greatly improving her chances of giving birth to a healthy baby. After her baby is born, they both continue to receive nutrition and health care assistance. Southwest Washington Health District provided federally-funded WIC services to 6,500 individuals in Clark and Skamania Counties. In addition to food and assistance with access to health care, these mothers receive education about food-borne illness and disease.

When a baby arrives in a family, additional support can be important to new parents, and to the health of the child. Health District nurses, social workers and nutritionists help provide this support by making visits to low income parents with new infants, offering information and teaching them



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how to keep their babies safe and healthy. These visits not only improve parent-child interaction and attachment, but studies have shown that this kind of early work with parents of infants reduces the incidence of child abuse and neglect. During 1999, District nurses served 852 families, visiting each family an average of 9 times.

Paul Childers Receives 1999 Public Health Award

Paul Childers, President of the Southwest Washington Restaurant Association, is the 1999 recipient of the Public Health Award for Southwest Washington. Paul has been an advocate, role model and innovator in improving restaurant food protection practices.

The owner of Clancy's Restaurant in Vancouver, Paul has promoted public health by working to increase restaurant manager training, supporting smoke-free restaurants, and most recently working with Health District staff to develop a proposal for a Restaurant Manager's Certification program. If instituted, the certificate would

reduce fees to the restaurant owner while increasing the number of inspections by trained restaurant staff.

As a leader in the restaurant industry, Paul advocated for the Health District when, in the face of severe budget cuts, fees had to be increased to cover costs of doing business. At times when media and others were opposing public health regulations, Paul has been the voice in the industry which says, "Public health services are critical to restaurant success."

The citizens of Clark and Skamania Counties are at less risk of getting sick from food-borne illness in a restaurant thanks to Paul Childers' leadership and advocacy.

Focusing on Basics

Initiative 695, approved by Washington's voters in the fall of 1999, drastically affected the budget and services of Southwest Washington Health District. The Motor Vehicle Excise Tax (MVET) has provided a portion of District funding, and more than \$1.7 million (12%) of the budget for 2000 was cut as a result in the MVET reduction authorized by I-695. The reduction has resulted in the elimination of 30 staff and management positions, closure of two satellite WIC (Women, Infants and Children Nutrition Program) offices and closure of the District's public health laboratory.

In the face of budget cuts, the District will continue to focus first on preventing the spread of infectious diseases, saving lives and preventing the suffering that these diseases cause. Control of communicable disease, food inspection, clean water and immunizations are basic to the health of the community. The Southwest Washington Board of Health and Health District staff remain committed to protecting the public health in Clark and Skamania Counties.

Public Health Operations

In order to protect the health of the 351,000 people in Clark and Skamania Counties during 1999, Southwest Washington Health District operated with 173 employees at ten sites and a \$12.3 million budget. Of this amount, 55% was from local taxes and fees, 43% from state and federal funds, and 2% from other sources. Grants and contracts provided \$6.8 million; permits and fees, \$2.1 million; and Medicaid billings, \$1.8 million. Revenue collections were improved and new financial reporting systems developed in order to keep a high level of service and efficiency. Careful planning ensured a smooth Y2K transition without problems or delays in computer and information systems.

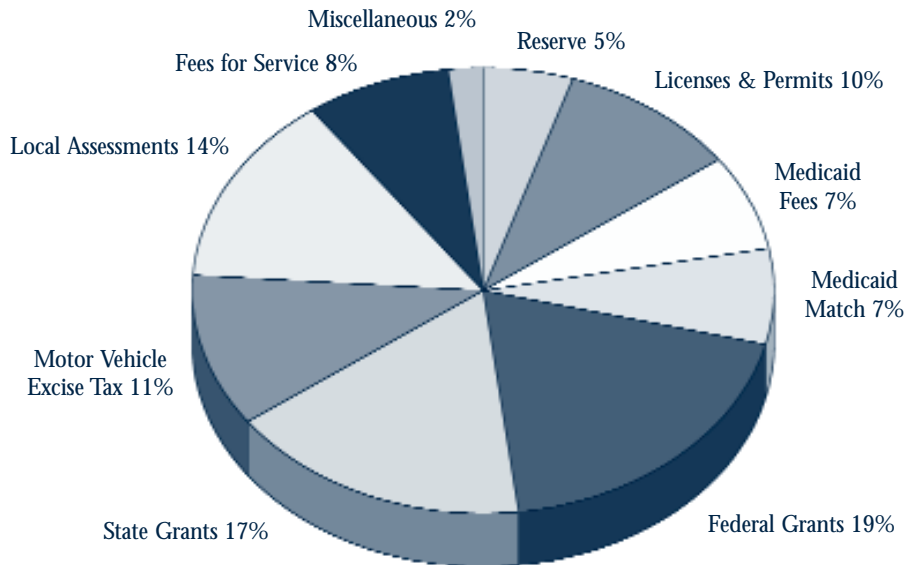


Southwest Washington Health District

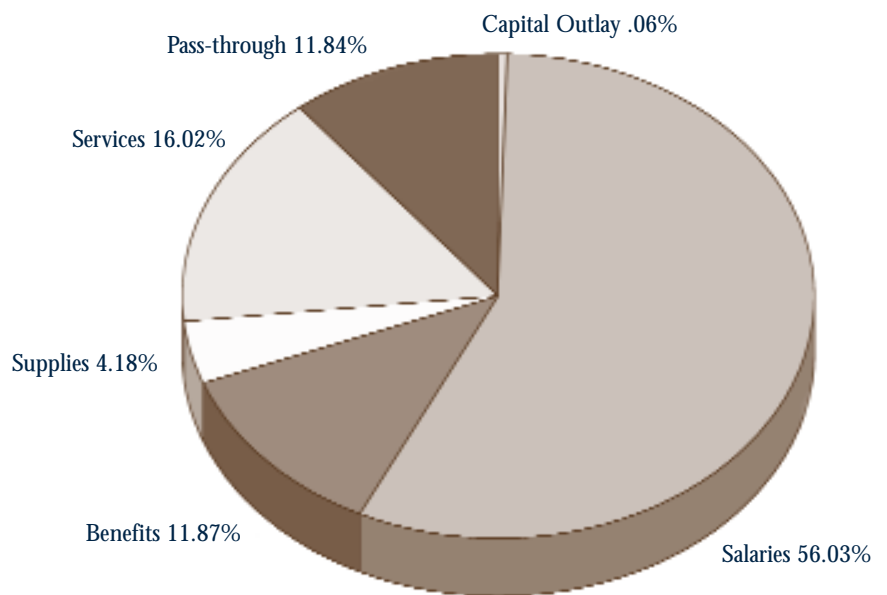
Working to preserve, promote and protect the health of citizens in Clark and Skamania Counties

360-397-8215 509-427-5138

1999 Revenue



1999 Expenses



Southwest Washington
Health District
1999 Annual Report

